

OBJECTIVE 2.4 Identify common psychological factors that contribute to law enforcement collisions

INTRODUCTION

While an emergency vehicle is a sophisticated piece of equipment, it is really more than a tool. Just like any other tool, it can be used well or it can be used improperly. In order to maximize a law enforcement vehicle's effectiveness, the operator must be in good shape, both mentally and physically.

OVERCOMING DANGEROUS ATTITUDES

One's mental approach to driving depends a great deal on one's attitude. This attitude is affected by many different factors, many of which can foster a state of mind that poses a risk to the officer's ability to operate the emergency vehicle. A person does not have to be angry or uncooperative to be in a hazardous frame of mind. There are several different types of attitudes that affect emergency vehicle operation; some of which are very subtle. It is possible that an officer might exhibit the traits of one of them and not even know it.

CONTENT

Psychological factors that need to be controlled to maximize vehicle operation capabilities include the following:

1. AGGRESSIVENESS

Aggressiveness is an emotional display of energy that generally impairs judgment. Aggressive behavior oftentimes manifests itself in "High-risk, Low-gain" driving maneuvers that greatly enhance the potential for mistakes or crashes. Common characteristics of aggressive behavior are:

- a. Over-confidence - which fosters an attitude that allows the officer to "show-off" his or her driving skills and promotes a feeling of invincibility.
- b. Self-righteousness - which fosters a belief that the law applies to others, but not to the officer, or that everyone will get out of the way because you are a law enforcement officer.

- c. Impatience - which is displayed in officers acting as though they are always in a hurry and a belief that others are preventing him from getting where he wants to go.

2. ASSERTIVENESS

Assertiveness is usually a show of confidence in knowing that the skills that have been taught will be successfully applied to the driving experience while operating the emergency vehicle. One can be assertive without being aggressive. Assertive officers are characterized by exercising the right of way, regardless of the situation or circumstance.

3. ATTITUDES AND VALUES

Attitudes and Values are generally cultivated within each individual at an early age. These attitudes and values are carried into the law enforcement career and generally are manifested in a critical incident. Due to the fact that the "Value System" of the officer may not be reflective of the promulgated policies within the department, agencies are encouraged to expose any improper attitudes in a controlled environment where they can be modified prior to entering the law enforcement vehicle.

4. EMOTIONS

Emotions are an overwhelming factor in decision-making. Many emotions are carried to the emergency vehicle from home or other employment. Common emotions that manifest themselves in the officer's driving behavior are:

- a. Stress - The nature of law enforcement work frequently subjects the officer to highly stressful situations. These situations usually occur without warning and may be preceded by a period of relative inactivity. Some stress is good. During intense situations, there is an injection of adrenalin into the bloodstream which can increase physical performance. It is possible to become more aware of surroundings and be able to think more clearly.

Stress does have a cumulative affect, however. It increases blood pressure and causes irregular breathing. Over time, the nervous system may be affected to the extent that the ability to think rationally is impaired. When the officer reaches that threshold, the ability to perform effectively will decrease rapidly.

- b. Anger - Anger may be the result of a totally unrelated experience; however, when carried into the emergency vehicle it can promote aggressive behavior and diminish the ability to make rational decisions.

- c. Depression - An irregular state of affairs in the officer's personal or professional life can be translated to depression. This emotion may be displayed with an "I don't care" attitude that fosters inattentiveness and risk-taking.

5. PATIENCE

Patience is an individual's ability to look at a situation logically. Patience promotes a "low-risk, high-gain" attitude while impatience inversely promotes a "high-risk, low-gain" attitude.

6. FATIGUE

Rotating shifts, secondary employment, lack of physical exercise, and other related factors contribute to fatigue. Fatigued drivers often become irritable and discourteous, causing them to overreact to minor irritations. More importantly fatigue affects visual efficiency and tends to lengthen perception, decision and reaction times.

SUMMARY

Knowing one's own abilities and limitations can influence the outcome of an emergency response. Actions taken by a law enforcement driver have an impact on the general public. They can have an impact on fellow officers as well. Having a good attitude and exhibiting quality behavior in emergency situations will serve everyone.

When the officer concentrates on the various psychological factors affecting the emergency response, the chances increase for vehicle control and acceptable decision-making. The end result is an officer who not only arrives at a desired destination without incident, but who also arrives psychologically in control.

STEPS FOR DEVELOPING GOOD DRIVER ATTITUDES

1. Use Training to Improve Skills. Training builds confidence. When an officer has been well-trained, he knows that he has the skills needed to handle almost any driving situation. Training also helps him to understand the state laws and agency policies that apply to all phases of emergency vehicle operations. Acting within the law prevents self-righteousness and increases respect for other drivers.
2. Practice What is Learned in Training. This forces the officer to think about what he is doing. If he is focused, he cannot be distracted. Thinking about and evaluating different options will make the officer a more patient driver. With constant practice, it can be determined what can and cannot be done. Knowing the limits keeps the officer from becoming overconfident.

3. Trust Your Judgment. When the officer's trained skills become second nature, he will develop a sense about what to do in almost every situation. In most cases, the "gut feeling" will be the correct procedure and will help prevent the officer from taking unnecessary chances.

SUGGESTED INSTRUCTIONAL METHODOLOGY

LECTURE

Present police-related collisions to the groups and explain how improper attitudes and lack of emotional control contributed to the collision. Use of transparencies or the chalkboard will aid in diagramming the crashes. Ask the groups for opinions as to how the collisions could have been avoided with better attitudes or increased emotional control.

SMALL GROUP

1. Divide the class into groups of 3-6 students. Ask the groups to list examples of emotions that can affect one's decision-making abilities, even if not related to driving. Then ask the students to explain how the same emotions can surface while driving and describe the effects the emotions are likely to have upon their driving performance. After individual groups formulate their responses, the instructor can ask each group to explain its findings to the class.
2. Divide the class into groups of 3-6 students. Ask the groups to list examples and state conditions relative to where and why law enforcement officers will find it difficult to concentrate, easy to become emotional, and easy to accept inappropriate risk. List their group responses and define what attitude adjustments will be required to make positive changes.

INDIVIDUALIZED LEARNING

Ask the students to formulate a personal plan, to be submitted to the instructor on the last day of training, that defines which concepts and skills covered during the training course will be most important for them to practice. Students should also state how the practice will take place.

RESOURCES AND AIDS

1. Psychology magazines and articles
2. Psychology textbooks
3. Guest lecturers experienced in emotional and attitudinal control

4. Newspaper articles or case law involving collisions and listing emotional factors as contributing to the collision

SUGGESTED EVALUATION METHODOLOGY

STUDENTS

1. Written or verbal response to questions concentrating on emotions, attentiveness, and willingness to improve
2. Observation of behavior during simulated scenarios
3. Observation of behavior during driving activities

COURSE

Observation of behavior during on-the-job performance

Attentiveness

Causes of Distractions

- Vehicle distractions
- Outside the vehicle
- Environmental factors
- Unfamiliar patrol areas
- Visual acuity focused by potential collision hazard